

Potawatomi Bingo Casino: Evolution of a Brand

To anyone familiar with Native American history, the title of Potawatomi Bingo Casino's brand campaign comes as no surprise. Consider the tribe's rich heritage: The oral tradition reveals that the Potawatomi originated in the Great Lakes and specifically the Wisconsin area. The Potawatomi lived close to the Ottawa and Chippewa tribes. Because of this proximity, along with having similar languages and culture, the three tribes formed an alliance. The Potawatomi were given the task of keeping alive the Sacred Fire.

Advertising gurus like to talk about the "brand story" aspect of marketing goods and services. Is it any wonder that Potawatomi Bingo Casino of Milwaukee has created its identity via a campaign titled simply "Storyteller?"

Kip Ritchie, Senior Vice President at the Potawatomi Business Development Corporation, started with PBC when it was primarily a bingo facility.

"Potawatomi Bingo Casino opened in the early '90s as a 2,500-seat bingo hall with 200 slots located inside a 40,000 sq. ft. pole building in downtown Milwaukee," he said. "We were known for our large bingo payouts, and quickly we became one of the most successful bingo halls in the country."

In order to grow, it became important for Potawatomi to compete with other entertainment operations. That meant expanding and improving their overall entertainment and



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hospitality offerings, and that, in turn, depended upon enlisting local support among the public and business community in Milwaukee. Thus began the first phase of defining the basic Potawatomi brand.

At the time, the public approval rating for gaming in Milwaukee was low - about 40 percent, recalls Ritchie. "To significantly impact public support, expand and become a successful property, we needed to discover what makes a first-class destination. We also needed to become a good corporate citizen in the process."

So the PBC team looked not only at companies in the gaming business, but other companies in and around the Milwaukee area that were successful and enjoyed a positive public image - companies like Miller Brewing, Harley-Davidson and Northwestern Mutual.

"These businesses are good at communicating their unique community impact, their ability to provide good, family-supporting jobs, their support of regional tourism and local charities through charitable foundations, and finally, they have management teams that are involved in the community," Ritchie explained. "All very consistent with Potawatomi's goals and ideals - we knew this was an important message to deliver."

A comprehensive public relations campaign helped the community rally around a high-end, casino entertainment destination owned and operated by a local Indian tribe rather than a national corporation. Milwaukee residents began to

anticipate positive repercussions for local businesses and the tourism industry.

With public perception in their favor, Potawatomi won approval of a new compact in 1998 - but the job was far from finished. "We still had to make a significant move from a 'bingo hall' to the vision of a No. 1 entertainment destination," Ritchie said. "Our leadership team immediately began developing a long-term business plan that embodied our goal to wow our guests."

Some critical components of the overall property transformation included developing an ongoing service training program for the 1,500-plus new team members, contracting with a restaurant management firm to hire and train our award-winning food and beverage team, as well as interviewing dozens of entertainment experts to launch the successful Northern Lights Theater.

The "vision" was carefully cultivated among Potawatomi's team members in all departments; each team member is, after all, a brand touch point that communicates the crucial PBC differentiation to every guest they encounter. Before long everyone on the property shared a unified vision: Potawatomi Bingo Casino, Wisconsin's #1 Entertainment Destination.



And how to communicate that ethos to potential guests? Enter the "Storyteller." Potawatomi's marketing department conducted focus groups and studies, "They spent a lot of time with customers. They also spent time with people who enjoyed gaming, but weren't coming to PBC - people from Northern Illinois, for instance. The question was simple: 'What type of gaming experience are they seeking?'"

The answers varied, but could be summarized as the desire for "fantasy." The casino almost becomes a character in the minds of potential guests. They imagine it as a sidekick that treats them as the leader, in control of the fun while being aided and abetted in its pursuit.

To embody the easy-going, cool, ready-for-anything vibe that research showed as aspirational targets for most guests, Potawatomi chose actor Vince Van Patten as spokesperson. His character is the personification of effortless class; always in a tux, tie undone, signature pinkie-ring gleaming and never far from the action - a perfect match for the casino's personality. "Vince Van Patten looks like your prototypical fun guy: exciting, good looking, fun-loving," observed Richie. "People could see themselves in it and make it meaningful."

As the most recognized face of the brand - Vince appears in print, on billboards, on television and can be heard in radio spots - the character is very, very scrupulously tended. "Vince is around the action, but never playing against a guest," said Potawatomi Bingo Casino Marketing Director Cassandra Rakoczy. "That's because it's important, as the 'stand-in' for the guest, he never lose. Vince is not used in offers, giveaways or promotions. He is exclusively representative of the Potawatomi Bingo Casino brand as a whole."

Vince's message is deceptively simple: Visit Potawatomi Bingo Casino and leave with a story to tell. The now-familiar tagline, "This is about to get interesting," is all about capitalizing on the atmosphere of possibilities and excitement in a high-end casino - a story ready to begin. This message resonates with the multiple demographics that must be reached.

Appealing to different demographics has meant evolving Vince and his message. "We do awareness studies and focus groups in Milwaukee and Chicago," Rakoczy said. "When Vince is more direct, the Chicago participants loved it. Milwaukee, however, likes him more approachable."

The Storyteller campaign lends itself well to Potawatomi's growth as well. An upcoming \$240 million expansion, which will triple the size of the casino complex, will be the next "chapter."

"Now we're beginning another phase, where our guests share with us their stories," Rakoczy says. "Because, while Vince is a fictional character, what he says is true: Visit Potawatomi Bingo Casino and you'll leave with, at the very least, a great story." ♣

For more information on Potawatomi Bingo Casino, visit www.paysbig.com